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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S NORTH: SATELLITE DISHES ON MUD HOUSES, BUSTLING MARKETS, POOR INTERNET CONNECTIONS

REFTEL: ASHGABAT 0550

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a recent visit to Turkmenistan's northern city of Dashoguz, PolOff found local residents generally positive about life in their region. Vendors in the city's largest market, which was bustling with activity on an ordinary Thursday afternoon, seemed upbeat and claimed that business was fine. One ethnic-Uzbek resident complained about low wages and lack of jobs in the area. One reason this snapshot of life in Dashoguz might be more positive than the most recent one (reftel) could be timing: people have had a chance to get used to a new exchange rate implemented just before the previous visit, and prices have leveled off. END SUMMARY.

DASHOGUZ: RUN-DOWN ATMOSPHERE, FRIENDLY PEOPLE

¶3. (SBU) On May 13-15, PolOff visited Dashoguz Province in northern Turkmenistan. The provincial capital, Dashoguz City, appeared nondescript and economically depressed, but also had the warm and friendly feel of a small town in the American Midwest. One resident explained that the older, more historic part of town was razed in the 1970s to make way for modern apartment blocks. As in much of Ashgabat, the exteriors of these buildings were covered with satellite dishes. A large cottonseed oil factory operated in the city center, scenting much of the surrounding area.

FOR ONE ETHNIC-TURKMEN VILLAGER, LIFE IS GOOD

¶4. (SBU) One resident, an ethnic Turkmen, invited PolOff to join him for a bite to eat at his house in the small village of Tezeyol, located in a rural area outside of Dashoguz. Like many of the villages of this region, Tezeyol has houses made of a mud-brick and clay mixture that is warm in winter and cool in summer, although the presence of satellite dishes atop most of these homes makes for a striking juxtaposition. The host, named Sapar, appears to be quite well-off. He has a house with a spacious courtyard in the back that features a traditional Turkmen-style yurt with a satellite television hookup and DVD-player. He said he owns 18 camels, as well as two passenger vans and a small bus that he uses to transport tourists as a local representative of an Ashgabat-based tourism agency.

¶ 15. (SBU) Sapar invited PolOff to join him and his brother, Charymuhammed, in his yurt, where he treated PolOff to fermented camel's milk, camel's-milk curds, and meat pies. Pointing to the fire, he noted with evident pride that the state continues to provide gas and electricity for free - the quantity of gas is not unlimited, he said, but it is more than enough. He said electricity is usually available, although there was a brief blackout while PolOff was eating. When PolOff mentioned that he had heard in Ashgabat that life was harder in Dashoguz, Sapar just chuckled. "We would say that it's worse in Ashgabat," he observed, adding "We have everything here - fruits, meat, all we need."

#### UZBEK ENTREPRENEUR WANTS BETTER INTERNET

¶ 16. (SBU) PolOff also spoke at length with the owner of the small hostel where he stayed, a middle-aged ethnic-Uzbek named Raman, who also seems to be well-off. In addition to the hostel, he runs a computer store, a photography studio, and a photocopy center in the same building. He said he has three children - a 20-year-old son completing his third year of study at Westminster International University in Tashkent, a daughter living in Ashgabat, and a daughter who works at the bazaar in Dashoguz. Raman had traveled to the United States twice, in 2000 and 2006, as a participant in the Department of Commerce's SABIT program, where he learned more about hotel management.

¶ 17. (SBU) Raman said when he started his computer business in 1995, his was the only such one in town, but now there is a lot more competition. One frustration is the lack of good Internet access. "I'm a computer salesman;" he noted, "how am I supposed to keep up with the latest developments in the business when it's so difficult

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to get information?" He said he wants to get his own Internet hook-up at home, but the available connection is so poor that it is hardly worth it. When asked what he thought of President Berdimuhamedov's repeated claims that he wants to increase Internet access throughout Turkmenistan, Raman shrugged and just said, "Let's hope he succeeds." He commented that so far, life seems to be getting better under Berdimuhamedov, who he compared favorably to former President Niyazov, who had imprisoned many people.

#### MARKET VENDORS REPORT BUSINESS IS "FINE"

¶ 19. (SBU) During a visit to the city's largest market, PolOff found prices to be more or less comparable to those in Ashgabat markets. On an ordinary Thursday afternoon, the market was humming with activity. PolOff chatted with one ethnic Turkmen named Merdan at a nearby cafe bustling with customers. He said he worked at the market selling small odds and ends like batteries, commenting that business is "fine." When questioned about recent price increases, Merdan shrugged and said that while some prices have gone up, others have gone down, so on balance things have not really changed. He added that while the price of gas has increased, it is still much cheaper to buy than in neighboring Uzbekistan.

¶ 10. (SBU) An ethnic-Uzbek woman in her late 50s said she was originally from Tashkent and had moved to Dashoguz 40 years ago to get married, although her husband had been dead for 15 years. She said she now lives with her children, receives a pension, and sells Chinese roses at the market because it is more interesting than sitting at home - she does not depend on this income for her livelihood. Other vendors at the market also responded to the basic question, "So, how's business?" with some variant of "Fine, can't complain."

#### ONE GRUMBLER ABOUT POOR QUALITY OF LIFE

¶ 11. (SBU) One ethnic Uzbek was less upbeat about life in Dashoguz. When PolOff commented on what a friendly place it seemed to be, the driver responded by pointing out that wages are low and jobs are scarce. Yet even he said that life is "a little bit better" under Berdimuhamedov than it had been under Niyazov, noting that the current president had restored pensions that had been cut by his predecessor. Despite his downbeat assessment of the Dashoguz economy, he said he nevertheless had no interest in leaving for

either Ashgabat or for Uzbekistan, noting that Dashoguz is his home and all his family and relatives live there.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite its reputation as being the poorest province in Turkmenistan, the Dashoguz residents with whom PolOff spoke seemed to be generally upbeat about their lives, offering a contrast to a visit by another EmbOff several weeks earlier. As in all reports of this kind, it is a snapshot of a certain time and place. One reason for the difference might be timing: people have had a chance to get used to a new exchange rate implemented just before the previous visit and prices have leveled off. END COMMENT.

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